

Canyonlands



National Park
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www.nps.gov/cany

Horseshoe Canyon



Horseshoe Canyon is a detached unit of Canyonlands National Park added in 1971. Its intriguing rock art is considered by many to be the most significant in North America. Other impressive sights include spring wildflower displays, sheer sandstone walls, and mature cottonwood trees which shade the canyon floor.

Cultural History

The archaeology of Horseshoe Canyon spans thousands of years of human history. Artifacts recovered from sites in this area date back as early as 9000-7000 BC, when Paleoindians hunted megafauna like mastodons and mammoths across the southwest.

Native American rock art found in Horseshoe Canyon is most commonly painted in a style known as “Barrier Canyon.” This style is believed to date to the Late Archaic period, from 2000 BC to AD 500. During this time, nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers continued to make Horseshoe Canyon their seasonal home.

During later periods, the Fremont and ancestral Puebloan cultures left their own distinctive rock art in the canyon, but their presence was brief in comparison and final abandonment had occurred by AD 1300.

The Great Gallery is the best known and most spectacular of the Horseshoe Canyon panels. This well-preserved site includes both pictographs (painted figures) and petroglyphs (figures etched in the rock with a sharp stone). The tapered, life-size figures, lacking arms and legs and frequently containing intricate designs, are characteristic of the Barrier Canyon style.

Though Horseshoe Canyon is most famous for its rock art, the canyon’s history has many chapters. Hundreds of years after the prehistoric artists left the area, Europeans arrived. Outlaws like Butch Cassidy made use of Horseshoe Canyon in the late 1800’s,

taking refuge in the confusing network of canyons, especially those around Robbers Roost to the southwest.

Later, in the early 1900’s, ranchers built several stock trails into Horseshoe so cows and sheep could reach water and feed in the canyon bottom. Eventually, the ranchers constructed a pumping operation to fill water tanks on the canyon rim. Many of these modifications are still visible today.

Prospectors explored the area in the mid-1900’s, improving many stock trails to accommodate vehicles and drill rigs. Though they searched the rock layers for oil and other minerals, no successful wells or mines were ever established around Horseshoe Canyon.

After being added to Canyonlands in 1971, grazing and mineral exploration were discontinued. Today, park visitors descend the old stock trail and marvel at the history of this magnificent canyon.



Barrier Canyon style rock art figures.

Preserving The Past

Help us protect archaeological resources. Rock art is extremely fragile and can be destroyed by the oil in human skin. Please do not touch or chalk around figures. All prehistoric artifacts and ruins are irreplaceable treasures. Walking through ruins, sitting on walls, handling artifacts and leaving modern graffiti destroys a site’s scientific and aesthetic value for future visitors.

How To Get There

Two-wheel-drive access to the west rim of Horseshoe Canyon is from Utah Highway 24 via 30 miles of graded dirt road, or from Green River on 47 miles of dirt road. Driving time is roughly 2.5 hours from Moab or 1.5 hours from Green River. A four-wheel-drive road leads to the east rim of Horseshoe Canyon from the Hans Flat Ranger Station. All roads may become impassable during storms. Most visitors access Horseshoe from the west side.

Camping

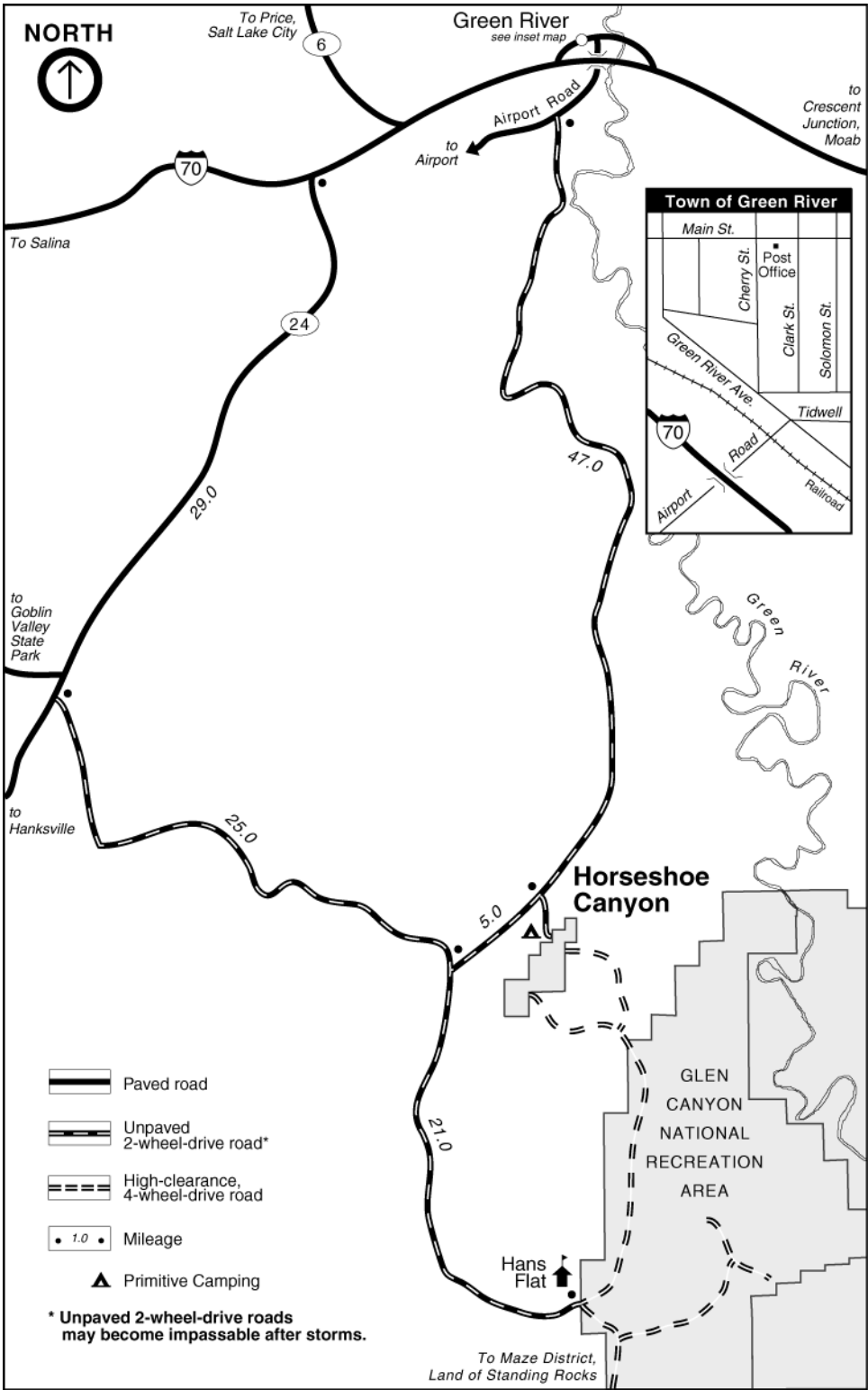
Visitors may camp at the west rim trailhead on public land managed by the BLM. A vault toilet is provided but there is no water. No overnight camping is allowed in Horseshoe Canyon within the Park boundary.

Hiking

From the west rim trailhead, the hike to the Great Gallery is 6.5 miles round-trip, descending 750 feet and requiring about six hours. **Pets are prohibited below the rim of Horseshoe Canyon.** Group size is limited to 20 people. Bring your own drinking water. There is no water above the canyon rim and water sources are unreliable within the canyon. All water should be purified.

Interpretive Activities

Rangers lead guided hikes in Horseshoe Canyon April through October. Walks depart the west rim parking lot Saturday and Sunday at 9 a.m. Special walks may be scheduled for groups of 20 or more by contacting the Hans Flat Ranger Station at (435)259-2652.



Further Information

Maps of Horseshoe Canyon include the Trails Illustrated series topographic map for Canyonlands National Park (Needles & Maze District), and the USGS 7.5-minute series Sugarloaf Butte topo map. These and other publications are available from Canyonlands Natural History Association at (800)840-8978, or on the Web at www.cnha.org.

Additional Reading:

Anasazi: Ancient People of the Rock Pike & Meunch, 1974, 191pp.
Anasazi: Prehistoric Cultures Houk, 1989 15pp
Cowboy Cave Jennings, 1980, 223pp.
Glen Canyon Revisited Geib, 1996, 223 pp.
Images on Stone Schaafsma, 1984, 31pp.
Indian Rock Art of the Southwest Schaafsma, 1980, 379pp.
Legacy on Stone Cole, 1990, 279pp.
Prehistory of Utah and the Eastern Great Basin Jennings, 1978, 263 pp.
Rock Art of Utah Schaafsma, 1971, 170pp.
Sacred Images Kelen & Sucec, 1996, 112pp.
The Anasazi: Why Did They Leave, Where Did They Go? Widdison, 1991, 71pp.
The Foraging Spectrum (Diversity in Hunter-Gatherer Lifeways) Kelly, 1995, 446pp.
The Origins of Pre-Columbian Art Grieder, 1982
Those Who Came Before Lister & Lister, 1993